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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002766

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: COMMONWEALTH TROIKA ON ZIMBABWE -- A
MEXICAN STANDOFF

CLASSIFIED BY DCM ANDREWS. REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

1. (C) Summary: Presidential International Affairs Advisor Ad'Obe Obe September 25 told Polcouns that the September 23 Commonwealth Troika meeting ended in stalemate. Australian PM Howard pushed to suspend Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth and for other sanctions to show displeasure over GOZ land seizures and stalled political negotiations with Mugabe's opposition. Diametrically opposite Howard was South Africa's Mbeki, who insisted the Troika lacked the mandate to suspend Zimbabwe or authorize sanctions. He wanted to give Zimbabwe and Mugabe more time to work toward political dialogue. Somewhere between, but clearly leaning towards Mugabe, stood Obasanjo. With neither Howard nor Mbeki softening his position, Obasanjo ultimately sided with Mbeki, and the meeting ended with no action taken against Zimbabwe. End Ssummary.

2. (C) During a September 25 meeting with PolCouns, Presidential Advisor Obe stated that the Abuja Troika was President Obasanjo's idea. On the margins of the WSSD, Obasanjo met serially with Australian PM Howard, South African President Mbeki and Mugabe. All three agreed to the Abuja meeting.

3. (C) Trouble started when Howard, asserting his prerogative as current Commonwealth Chairman, took it upon himself to organize the meeting. In tandem with Commonwealth Secretary General McKinnon, Howard prepared the agenda and invitations with minimal consultations with Abuja and presumably Pretoria, commented Obe. Feeling that Howard was hijacking the meeting, Obasanjo briefly considered its cancellation but thought that would do more harm than good.

4. (C) Obe described the invitation to Mugabe as insulting. The only plausible explanation for the invitation's terseness was an intention to provoke the Zimbabwean leader, Obe maintained. Adding to the perceived insult, the invitation was publicized on the Internet. Mugabe, believing his public humiliation and embarrassment was Howard's aim, decided against attending the session. Obasanjo attempted to convince Mugabe to rethink his nonattendance by stating that the issues raised by Howard were mere points for discussion, not foregone conclusions. Obasanjo's entreaty was ineffectual. At the end of their conversations, Mugabe sealed his absence by offering that he would attend on the condition that the status of Australia's Aborigines was the first item discussed by the Troika.

5. (C) Upon hearing that Mugabe changed his mind, Mbeki also decided not to show. According to Obe, there was a flurry of phone calls between Howard, Obasanjo and Mbeki. After much heavy pushing, Mbeki was turned back toward to Abuja. By then however, pre-meeting atmospherics were decidedly negative and this palpable tension was an active participant in the Abuja meeting.

6. (C) In Abuja, Howard strongly advocated that the Troika toss the book at Mugabe by suspending Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth for the land seizures and for stalling the political dialogue. Mbeki steadfastly opposed Howard, claiming the Troika lacked the mandate to suspend Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth or to approve other sanctions. Initially, Obasanjo tried to find middle ground then pull Howard and Mbeki toward consensus so that the meeting could end with a unified position. However, neither Mbeki nor Howard budged, forcing Obasanjo to decide between the two. Predictably, Obasanjo cast his deciding vote in Mbeki's favor.

7. (C) According to Obe, the meeting rekindled the tempers that flared during the Commonwealth Summit in Australia. There, African leaders criticized British PM Blair for failing to give sufficient weight to the history of social and racial injustice underlying the GOZ position on land seizures. This time in Abuja, Mbeki took Howard to task for being insensitive to Zimbabwe's history. Becoming

increasingly animated, Obe stated that both Howard and Commonwealth Secretary McKinnon were not attempting to be impartial, but were carrying Britain's water at this meeting.

He stressed that both Mbeki and Obasanjo were rankled that the British and Howard seemed indifferent to the equities and emotions underlying the Zimbabwean land dispute.

18. (C) The British lend more weight to the plight of 4,000 farmers than the whole issue of Zimbabwean independence, Obe bristled. Mugabe had repeatedly stated the independence struggle was over land. There were black Zimbabweans who remembered living on and owning the farms now occupied by white farmers. If those lands did not devolve to the blacks, the struggle for independence would be incomplete. It was this quest to gain recompense for past injustices that made most African leaders sympathetic to Mugabe, Obe asserted. Unless the West realized the strength of this sentiment, there would be continued friction and misunderstanding between the West and Africa concerning the way forward in Zimbabwe.

19. (C) Reflecting on the dynamics at the Troika meeting, Obe remarked that it was naive to expect Mbeki to energetically oppose Mugabe. The rank-and-file in Mbeki's ANC strongly sympathized with Mugabe. If Mbeki openly sided with Britain against Mugabe, he would suffer a tremendous domestic backlash, particularly given that South Africa's day of reckoning on the land redistribution lies in the future, Obe opined.

110. (C) While Nigeria did not have to grapple with the same dilemma facing Mbeki and South Africa, President Obasanjo felt some personal responsibility for Zimbabwe, Obe continued. In 1979, then military Head of State Obasanjo encouraged Mugabe to accept the proposed Zimbabwean constitution, which placed a 10-year moratorium on the land question. In 1989, when the 10-year ban ended, then African statesman Obasanjo joined the chorus of other voices counseling Mugabe not to move forward with land reform. It was feared that events in Zimbabwe could cause apartheid hard-liners to retrench in South Africa and scuttle the emergent reforms beginning to take place. Having twice advised Mugabe to idle himself, Obasanjo now felt some sympathy for the principle underlying Mugabe's actions, although he did not agree with Mugabe's tactics. Consequently, Obasanjo was very reluctant to excoriate the Zimbabwean and instead wanted to maintain dialogue with him.

111. (C) Regarding Mugabe, Obe posited that Mugabe generally had accomplished his goals on land seizures; he considered himself as presenting the world with a fait accompli as to the farms recently seized. However, Obe pointed out Mugabe was careful that his land seizures did not leave affected farmers landless. He only seized the lands of people who owned multiple farms. Because Mugabe was more comfortable with what he has done on land redistribution, now might be the best time to nudge him to a more conciliatory stance on internal political dialogue, Obe offered.

112. (C) Comment: By his very nature, Obe is an acerbic, sometimes combative personality, so his comments must be seen in this light. The friction attendant at the Abuja Troika might not be quite as intense as he described. However, he is not prone to invent things that did not happen. We think his account is generally indicative of what happened. Thus, instead of bridging the differences between the African leaders and the Western outlooks on Zimbabwe, the Troika only accentuated these divergent viewpoints.

JETER